

Feminist Critical Study on Contemporary Women's Writing and Female Culture with Special Focus on Sylvia Plath's Poems

Azadeh Mehrpouyan.

Ph.D. Student in English Literature
Bharati Vidyapeeth University,
Pune,
India

E mail: dr.mehrpooyan@gmail.com .

And

Dr. Mutkaja Mathkari
Bharati Vidyapeeth University,
Pune,
India

Abstract:

This article investigates the roles of women and men in society from an interdisciplinary point of view. The author discusses how it shapes social roles within diverse cultures, and defines women and men's personal sense of identity in literary contexts. The literary criticism and cultural theories in women writing are analyzed. The author focuses on Sylvia Plath as a feminist poetess definitely and examines the reflections of female- culture tendencies in feminist criticism on Sylvia Plath's poems. In author's opinion, her works are valuable for their ability to reach contemporary reader, because of its concern with the real problems of contemporary dominant culture. In this age of gender conflicts, broken families, and economic inequities, Plath's forthright language speaks loudly about the anger of being both betrayed and powerless. The effects of gender on participation in literary expression are explored. Finally, the paper concludes cultural anthropology and social history can offer a terminology of women's cultural condition but feminist critics must use this concept in relation to what women actually write.

Introduction & Background:

There is a greater diversity of women writing now than in any period. They differ in class, ethnicity, race, age, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. More educated than their precursors, they also have the advantage of drawing on the works of a rich tradition of male and female writers. This paper examined the impact of contemporary female culture on feminism criticism among modern women writers with special reference to Sylvia Plath's poetry.

It is difficult to define feminism accurately as there are arguments among feminists. Feminism can be called a mode of critical discourse which emphasizes culturally determined gender differences in the interpretation of literary works. Feminism generally focuses on the

history of male dominance and oppression in all aspects of life. Feminism has become a dominant force in contemporary literary criticism. It has made considerable advancement during a small period of time. It is difficult to define feminism accurately as there are arguments among feminists. Feminist literary criticism has played a crucial part in breaking the logo-centric tradition and challenging the supremacy of the privileged concepts and values in the patriarchal systems. This is its alternative approach to literary as well as cultural studies. Some modern women writers have achieved both wide popular readership and much critical attention because they tended largely to focus on their cultural, political, and social views most notably their feminism such as Sylvia Plath. Literature will often reflect the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period, and that of course includes attitudes towards women: their status, their roles, their expectations. But a literature doctored of male-orientated views would be failing in its first requirement, to present a realistic or convincing picture of the world. Moralizing, which includes political correctness, has its dangers. Nowadays, Feminist scholars explore a wide range of visions of identity and difference. Sexual politics can help to determine what gets written and what is valued in the anthropological canon.

In study of women's writing, Feminist critics can turn to female experience as the source of an autonomous art and extend the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. According to Elaine Showalter (1981), a theory based on a model of women's culture can provide a more complete way to talk about the difference of women's writing than theories based on biology, linguistic and psychoanalysis. Really, a theory of culture incorporates ideas about women's body, language and psychoanalysis. But it interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers. However, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole. It is an experience which binds women writers to each other over time and space. In fact, modern feminist criticism focuses to develop and cover a female style of writing, to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective, female culture to interpret symbolism of women's writing which was lost or ignored by the male point of view, to rediscover old texts and contemporary cultural-political trends, to increase awareness of the sexual politics and culture of language and genre and to resist sexism in literature.

Plath became the first poet to win a Pulitzer Prize posthumously for 'The Collected Poems'. Her works are also valuable for their ability to reach contemporary reader, because of its concern with the real problems of contemporary dominant culture. In this age of gender conflicts, broken families, and economic inequities, Plath's forthright language speaks loudly about the anger of being both betrayed and powerless. Plath's life and poetry have been constructed in such a way as to perpetuate specific fictions about her marriage, mental illness, and "autobiographical" writing, and although this may in part be due to a mythologizing tendency among critics and biographers, it can be demonstrated how Plath fictionalizes herself in her writing style. Plath's various collections of her poems that appeared during the next twenty years, secured for Plath the position of one of the most significant women writers in the world. The mixture of comic self-deprecation and forceful anger made her work a

foreshadowing of the feminist writing that appeared in the later 1960s and the 1970s. The posthumous awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry to Plath's 'Collected Poems' showed, her audience was not limited to women readers, nor did her writing express only feminist sentiments. Her poetry reveals an intensely personal struggle with self-consciousness, bold metaphors for death and sexuality, and a pioneering examination of societal limitations experienced by women. Viewed as a cathartic response to her divided personae as a writer, wife and, mother, Plath's works have been heralded by feminist critics for illuminating the professional and personal barriers faced by women in the mid-twentieth century. These factors with her tragic death made Plath an iconic figure whose popular fame has nearly equaled her literary praise. Her suicide Sylvia Plath has become a heroine and martyr of the feminist movement.

Discussion & Analysis:

Trace of feminism in modern women's writing in 20th century and survey of their views on the cultural and psychoanalytic models of women's writing could be considerable in speculative literature. Furthermore, feminist criticism certainly can help the readers to go beyond a woman's texts through identifying cultural and psychoanalytic models of modern women's writing and can also help the readers to read them. Hypotheses of women's culture have been developed recently by anthropologists, sociologist and social historians. They are developed to get away from masculine systems and values. They also aim at getting at the primary and self-defined nature of female cultural experience. In the field of women's history, the concept of women's culture is still controversial, although its significance as a theoretical formulation has been accepted. In defining female culture, historians distinguish between the roles, activities, tastes and behaviors considered appropriate for women. In the 19th century, the term "women's sphere" expressed the Victorian vision of separate roles for men and women. Edwin Ardners (1975) suggested that woman constitute a "muted group" and is bound arise overlap the dominant (male) group. They discussed the "wild zone" or "female space". Many American critics too have given their views on female culture and women's writing. Modern critics too have discussed female culture. Showalter claims that the feminist critics must go beyond the assumption that women writers either imitate their male predecessors or revise them. One of the great advantages of the women's cultural model is that it shows how the female tradition can be positive source of strength as well as a negative source of powerlessness. It can generate its own experience and symbols. The cultural mode of women's writing certainly helps to read a woman's text.

Plath as modern woman writer developed to get away from dominant masculine cultures, systems and values. She also aimed at getting at the primary and self-defined nature of her female cultural experience in her works. She used the personal to speak to cultural concerns, many of which apply to women's conflicts and transitions in modern society. In Plath's first poetry collection, 'The Colossus' reveals feminism, fragmentation and motherhood within contemporary culture. The author believes that the collection demonstrates Plath's mastery of traditional literary forms while having the influence of confessional poets. Several poems in this collection introduce Plath's obsession with the symbol of the father figure, who is treated with scorn and rage but who is also invoked as a muse. 'Lady Lazarus' features a speaker

who addresses 'Herr Doktor' and the poem's central metaphor, the revived Lazarus from the Bible, has been read as a reference to a woman who has survived several suicide attempts. The closing declaration of the woman's ability to "eat men like air" sounds a note of revenge against the male figure the speaker identifies as her "Enemy." Similar references are found in 'Daddy,' where the poetic voice associates both her husband and father with herself. The title poem, 'Ariel,' indicates Plath's complex use of color imagery. It includes a forceful move from darkness to light that has been interpreted as a woman speaker transforming herself into the male image of the arrow. 'Ariel', which is written in a dual or double voice, contains both a female voice and language full of feminine and sexual images; "God's lioness", "Thighs, hair, flakes from my heels"(arouses a sexual connotation), Godiva," and "the child's cry"- (feminine duties). Additionally the poem proposes on The one hand to convey a feeling of powerlessness and fragility of the woman rider who has to struggle for control over her horse. On the other hand, there is the notion of power, force and control which are conventionally male traits. She wants to escape, she wants to be like an arrow which is endowed with that force and even manages to become one for a while. There is a constant battle of forces between the fragile woman speaker and the male stronger forces such as the horse and the sun. In relation to Elaine Showalter's article, what comes into focus in this poem is the cultural and feminine chores which Sylvia Plath abandons and wishes to escape, and the use of the body as a source of imagery as suggested by Showalter .

As Showalter suggested that women writers have their own unique language which is based on feminine experience, Sylvia Plath speaks a language endowed with feminine notions .Moreover, she makes a vast use of the wild zone mentioned by Showalter and within this zone tries to break free from convention. Only by making this journey with 'Ariel' and reaching its final destination, can she find her way out of this confined world (literally or metaphorically), uninterrupted by the dominant male group. In this poem Plath actually takes control over the situation and causes change .As Susan Bordo (1995) asserts the power relations between the dominant group and women does not always imply that women are always dominated by the dominant group ;although it is conventionally so. Thus, in 'Ariel' the speaker does not allow the dominant group to overcome her and takes control by escape. Sylvia Plath's obsession with control, as seen in this poem, ended in a state of gaining control (death or abandonment of conventional life). This may seem parallel to the anorectic woman who seeks for control over her physical hunger and her body. As soon as the goal is attained, the anorectic woman gains a feeling of accomplishment and control just as Sylvia Plath has a feeling of hope and accomplishment at the end of 'Ariel'. When Bordo defines anorexia as a rebellious act against social conventions of the full figured, domestic female figure, this is highly echoed in 'Ariel' in which we observe the speaker as a rebellious figure, denying conventional social roles and seeking to escape.

Many of these notions appear in another poem of Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips'. In Tulips the speaker who is lying in hospital, feeling immense peacefulness, having given up all her responsibilities, identity and connection to the world "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses..."However, this peacefulness is disrupted by the red tulips which were sent by her husband, invading her

privacy and feeling of detachment from the world, reminding her of the outside world which she is currently separated from. The idea of lying in bed being ill is parallel to Susan Bordo's notion of the nature of anorexia as a rebellious reaction to cultural and social norms. By lying in bed the woman denies her identity and social duties and is able to reach an escape from duties without being expected to perform these duties (being ill). At the beginning of the poem, Plath illustrates her total tranquility and passivity, allowing herself to be completely taken care of by others "my body is a pebble to them..." This escape from her life and duties also relates to what Showalter mentions in relation to the cultural realm of difference in female literature, which is influenced by the cultural roles of women. Here, Plath has found a way to escape her domestic chores. This situation is her wild zone in which she is able to fulfill her desires. This is why she is so angry at the invasion of the tulips of the new world she has temporarily created for herself. The red tulips, disrupting the whiteness and purity of the hospital room, are a symbol of the outside room, her family and reminders of the social duties she will have to return to. By attacking even the pictures of her husband and child ("their smile catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks"), she makes this idea very clear. As the poem proceeds, she personifies the tulips ("...hear them breathe...redness talks to my wound...now I am watched...") and blames them for consuming her oxygen and choking her. Like in 'Ariel', this escape from domestic and social traditional roles can be seen also in the light of Elaine Showalter's article who cites Shirley and Edwin Ardener who perceived the female "wild zone" as a situation created by women where they do not wish to be interrupted by the male. The tulips, sent by the male (her husband) are in fact trespassing into her wild zone where men have no place. This "wild zone", besides being an escape can also be regarded as a yield for death. She is situated in state of not living, being underwater ("the water went over my head"), feeling numb seems close to being dead. Death is symbolized by the whiteness and purity of the hospital (opposed to the living red tulips).

The idea of quietness and purity of death as a goal may be echoed in Bordo's perception of the anorectic's feeling of control over physical limitations (which death is apparently one of them and may be seen as the highest form of control). Some Feminist scholars have frequently recognized Plath for her pioneering efforts to expose the absurdity of conventional feminine models and her attempts to establish equal footing for women writers in a male-dominated publishing industry. Indeed, her works as groundbreaking female version of the typically masculine coming-of-age novel can be identified and the book's incisive portrayal of the frustrations felt by a talented and ambitious young woman in a profession dominated by men was hailed. Joyce Carol Oates (2000) has also written of alienation in Plath's poetry, contending that it represents outmoded Romantic ideas that identify the human condition as one of isolated competition. In this text, Oates has characterized Plath's poems as "regressive fantasies" that speak of a separate self rather than a universal one. It has been affirmed by most feminist critics, however, that insurmountable masculine oppression is what led to Plath's obsessive preoccupation with alienation. 'Ariel' serves as an analogy for Plath's role as a woman poet and argues that the female speaker's attempt to transform herself into a more masculine figure ultimately proven futile. (Kathleen Margaret Lant, 1993) Similarly, 'Lady Lazarus' has been discussed in the context of this struggle by some other scholars, with Maureen Curley (2001) contending that the poem

serves as a commentary on the difficulties faced by female artists and Laura Johnson Dahlke (2002) concluding that the speaker's conflict with 'Herr Doktor' represents a struggle against male dominance that ultimately ends in defeat. Christina Britzolakis (1999) extended this gender conflict to society as a whole, arguing that Plath addresses a much larger issue than mere feelings of alienation and futility in the face of male domination. Plath's poetry can be seen as an exhibition of ironic self-reflection in response to the widespread cultural objectification of women as mere commodities for mass consumption. (Britzolakis, 1999)

Some evidences were found which illustrate the feminist movement when the society was mainly dominated by men culture e.g. one of Plath's poems, ' Mushrooms' is about her experience of the feminist movement and when women were fighting to get the vote and become equal to men. The poetess tries to get across that women will soon be getting what they deserve and that they are just as good as men and deserve to vote and they also should be treated as equals. Some other indications of creation of feminist versions were found in Plath's best-known poem, 'Daddy,' which tells in a disquietingly singsong rhythm the story of a daughter's fury at the "fascist brute" who is her father. The passive role of women in all fields was dominated in 1990s, inside the woman as mirror, behind this physically restricted, passive, depersonalized reflector of the external world, lurks the minatory force that emerge with full power and vengeance in some of the 'Ariel' poems and 'Mirror'. To escape the obligations of literal truthfulness is not to escape the mirror of male texts that identify her as the obedient angel, but the opposite.

It is to evade the monstrous truth the angel herself knows best and fears no less than does the male who protectively Anglicizes her in order to prevent her transformation into monster. It is to look into the mirror and pretend one does not see the monster. Because it recognizes the danger both of reflecting and ignoring the world, 'Mirror' can be seen as the turning point in Plath's development. The voice in poems such as 'Stones,' 'Lorelei,' 'Tulips,' 'Love Letter,' 'Crossing the Water,' 'Purdah,' 'Face Lift,' 'Two Campers in Cloud Country,' 'Childless Woman,' and dozens more is that of a woman who has accepted her depersonalization and passivity or who longs for the numbing purity it promises. 'Mirror' represents a kind of middle-ground between the extremes of passivity and action, numbing self-cancellation and aggressive self-assertion. To assume the mirror's role is implicitly to accept the male-proscribed image of woman and mother. But the poem's method and equations situate the terrible fish within the lake and mirror and quietly establish an identity between them. The poem's implicit rejection of the mirror's claim to literal reflection is what generates the image of threatening female autonomy that the poem ostensibly disavows. Blending passive inactivity with devouring hostility, the poem presages the vengeful uprising of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' while maintaining the innocent, expressionless appearance of paper, stone, mannequin, or doll. Sylvia Plath is a great exemplification to show feminist ideas in the poems 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', 'The Applicant', 'Kindness' and 'Ariel'. All these poems have an interrelation to express aspects of objectification of women, marriage dependency, women's creativity, revenge on men and women's independence. Sylvia notices the roles of subordinate women though she also competes for the desire to be a mother and a beloved, loving wife. In the poems 'Kindness' and 'The Applicant', Plath reveals that women

in society have little value. The sarcastic attitude and painful confidence manipulates readers to see this creative view and the shameful men are conveyed in 'Lady Lazarus'. In 'The Applicant,' Plath attacks the expected society which women must conform to marriage, challenging the gender roles by satirizing the similar structure of marriage vows and she tries to withstand.

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Simultaneously Sylvia's personal and painful life expressed in her poems has a deeper meaning reflecting contemporary cultural tendencies in the feminist criticisms of the 1960s. The fact dying can be creatively seen as a rebirth to a new overruling female culture.

Will you marry it?
"To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
Dame Kindness, she is so nice!".....

For example, females are depersonalized as an extra domesticated hand in 'The Applicant' and personified as a sweet housewife and mother in 'Kindness'. 'Kindness' is the craving to be 'Dame Kindness' (the sweet mother and woman), yet to create and feel at the same time.

A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

The repetition of the word talk implicates the annoyance of women and they are only useful for domestic services for the dominating men and woman is treated as a living doll. The mocking- metaphoric tone is noticed in a theatrical mood whereas females are the performers with no authority but to please the aggressive males.

Conclusion:

Finally, cultural anthropology and social history can offer us a terminology of women's cultural situation. But feminist critics must use this concept in relation to what women actually write. The cultural mode of women's writing certainly helps to read a woman's texts. In author's opinion, Feminist criticism gives a particular focus on both the literary and cultural production in the contemporaneity. There is an interrelationship between culture theories and feminist literary criticism and opens up new perspectives and ideologies for literary critics. It should be considered as distinct criteria when studying modern feminist literary criticism. Sylvia Plath as a modern woman writer has achieved both wide popular readership and much critical attention because she tended largely to focus on her cultural and social views most notably her feminism. Plath as feminist examined a larger cultural context; her works are quite possibly some of greatest works of feminist literature.

Works Cited

- Agnes, Michael, Webster's New World College Dictionary. John Wiley & Sons, (2007)
- Ardener, Edwin (1975). *Belief and the problem of women*. Ardener, Shirley (Ed.),
Perceiving women (1-17). London: Malaby Press.
- Blain, Virginia; Clements, Patricia; Grundy, Isobel, *The feminist companion to
literature in English: women writers from the Middle Ages to the present*. New
Haven: Yale University Press. (1990).
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*.
Berkeley: U of California P, 1995
- Britzolakis, Christina. "The Spectacle of Femininity." In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre
of Mourning*, pp. 135-56. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999
- Chodorow, Nancy .*Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale
University Press. (1989).
- Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus, London: Collins. (2008)
- Cornell, Drucilla, *At the heart of freedom: feminism, sex, and equality*. Princeton,
N.J.: Princeton University Press, (1998).
- Curley, Maureen. "Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'." *Explicator* 59, no. 4 (summer 2001): 213-14.
- Dahlke, Laura Johnson. "Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'." *Explicator* 60, no. 4 (Summer
2002): 50-2.
- Edited Article by Frances Bixler, University of Central Arkansas Press, 1988
- Gilligan, Carol , "'In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and Morality'",
Harvard Educational Review 47(4): 481–517, (1977)
<<http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails>>. Retrieved
on 8 June 2008
- Humm, Maggie, *Modern feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*. New York:
Columbia University Press, (1992)

- Humm, Maggie, *The dictionary of feminist theory*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, (1990)
- Joyce Carol Oates, Michiko Kakutani Reviews 'The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962' (Oct. 31, 2000)
- Krolokke, Charlotte; Anne Scott Sorensen, "Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Girls", *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance* , Sage, 24. (2005)
- Lant, Kathleen Margaret. "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 4 (winter 1993): 620-70.
- Rouse, John. "After Theory, the Next New Thing." *Urbana*: Mar 2004. Vol. 66, No. 4; pg. 452, 14 pgs.
- Sandra M. Gilbert, "Paperbacks: From Our Mothers' Libraries: women who created the novel." *New York Times*, May 4, (1986)
- Showalter, Elaine, ed. *New feminist criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics," *Women's Writing and Writing About Women*. London: Croom Helm, 1979.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Hystories: hysterical epidemics and modern media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Inventing herself: claiming a feminist intellectual heritage*. New York: Scribner, 2001
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual anarchy: gender and culture at the fin de siècle*. New York: Viking, 1990.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The female malady: women, madness, and English culture, 1830–1980*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus and Other Poems* Publisher: Vintage; 1st Vintage

International edition, (1998)

Walker, Rebecca, "Becoming the Third Wave", (1992)

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 8.

University of Chicago: Winter, 1981.
